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MILTON AND THE RETURN TO HUMANISM

BY JAMES HOLLY HANFORD

It is now some two centuries and a half since John Milton gave forth his greatest poem to an alien world, consoling himself in the isolation of his evil days with the thought that, whatever its immediate reception might prove to be, *Paradise Lost* was a work of lofty thinking and uncompromising art which would always find "fit audience though few" and which "after times" would not willingly let die. Time has amply justified his faith. Through all revolutions of taste and thought, despite much "barbarous noise" of controversy and "detraction rude," the chorus of praise has risen in ever increasing volume. It would seem paradoxical to say that Milton has received less than his due measure of that lasting fame which was for him, though in his sterner thought he held it vanity, an object of intense desire. Yet, looking back upon the history of Milton's triumph over the judgment of mankind, one is tempted to affirm that he has fared but ill even at the hands of his most devoted friends. The mass of critical appreciation seems in large measure to have missed its mark, to have been, on the whole, perversely directed to aspects of his work which he himself would have deemed of secondary importance. It is not strange that it has been so. For the appeal of Milton, as of all the great forces in the literature of the past, has been conditioned by the moral and intellectual outlook of successive generations of readers, and in so far as the atmosphere of the later age has differed, vitally, from that in which Milton lived, criticism has inevitably suffered limitations. It has suffered, also, from the character of polemic which so much of it has assumed. The ardent defense of Milton against one charge after another levelled against him by enemies of his art or thought has led of necessity to partial views. And as the dust of controversy has subsided the discussions which have grown out of it have come to seem unsatisfactory and incomplete. For the present generation even the "standard" interpretations and estimates of the Victorian era savor too much of the special bias of the time. Meanwhile the signs multiply of an important departure in Milton investigation and criticism.

The number of studies which have dealt anew with the themes of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, have re-examined Milton's relations with Spenser and the Elizabethans, have overhauled his doctrines in both his poetry and his prose, have subjected to analysis his political as well as his moral and religious philosophy, are evidence that the effects of an altered viewpoint, which is itself the fruit of a new age of experience, are beginning to be felt.¹ These studies are in the main scholarly rather than controversial in character. They aim at interpretation rather than defense. Out of them we are about to write a new chapter in Milton criticism which, without altogether invalidating the old, will testify to the enduring vitality of the supreme works of human genius not for their art alone, and will reaffirm the principle that poetry is a higher and more philosophical thing than prose. It is perhaps an appropriate moment to pass in brief review the Miltonism of the past in its chief phases, with the aim of defining more clearly the special character of the new approach. Materials for such a review are already at hand in recent monographs and articles devoted to the history of Milton's reputation.² Discussion naturally centers in *Paradise Lost*, for in that poem, by common consent, the influences which shaped Milton's art and thought met in the most perfect balance, and it is by *Paradise Lost* that his position in English literature is determined.

By a strange fatality the audience for which *Paradise Lost* was ideally intended had at the moment of its publication already ceased to exist. Conceived and partly executed in a time when the forces of the Renaissance had not altogether lost their potency and when a synthesis of the two great movements of the age was still possible,

¹ A few of the more significant contributions are: E. N. S. Thompson, *Essays on Milton*; Alden Sampson, *Studies in Milton*; A. H. Gilbert, "The Temptation Motive in *Paradise Regained*" (*Journal of English and German Philology*, 1916); Edwin Greenlaw, "A Better Teacher than Aquinas" (*Studies in Philology*, 1917); H. W. Peck, "The Theme of *Paradise Lost*" (*Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 1914); John Erskine, "The Theme of Death in *Paradise Lost*" (*Ibid.*, 1917); and "Was *Paradise* Well Lost?" (*Ibid.*, 1918); and R. L. Ramsey, "Morality Themes in Milton's Poetry" (*Studies in Philology*, 1918).

² R. D. Havens, "Seventeenth Century Notices of Milton," and "Early Reputation of *Paradise Lost*" (*Englische Studien*, 1909, 40: 175 ff.); John W. Good, *Studies in the Milton Tradition* (University of Illinois *Studies in Language and Literature*, 1915).

the poem was not actually given to the world until years of conflict had made an irremediable breach in the soul of man. Puritanism, indeed, outlived the Restoration, but it was a Puritanism narrowed and hardened into opposition to poetry, a Puritanism committed solely to conduct and no longer capable of being blended with art and thought. Its literary forms are the sermon and the tract and the didactic allegory. Such a Puritanism had existed in the earlier period, but until the civil wars it had existed simply as a check upon and a protest against the more extreme secular tendencies of the Renaissance. Milton's true kinship is not with Bunyan or Baxter, nor yet altogether with Cromwell and the heroes of the battle for religious and political liberty, but with those men of the older day, whose spiritual aspirations were united with the human passion for truth and beauty and who trusted the imagination as an important medium for the attainment of their ideals. Of the Elizabethans Spenser might have read *Paradise Lost* with a comprehending soul. So too in their degree might Taylor, the Fletchers, Herbert, Donne. Even in Milton's own day there were perhaps a few whose outlook was sufficiently akin to his—men like Marvel or the gentle and humane Colonel Hutchinson, or the musician Lawes, or Lawrence "of virtuous father virtuous son." But Puritans like this were rare and becoming rarer. In the Restoration period Milton stood alone, as unintelligible in his point of view to the author of *Pilgrim's Progress* as he was to Dryden and the literary wits of the court of Charles II. The point is often overlooked by those who, focusing their view on his Puritanism, conceive of him as a poet for the Puritans. Orthodox theology in the eighteenth century did indeed derive some support from *Paradise Lost*, but no one surely will claim that Milton came to his own as a champion of the dying cause of Calvinism.

In the end it was, paradoxically enough, the wits and not the Puritans who first seriously undertook the criticism of *Paradise Lost*, and in their appreciations and discussions we may discover the initial phase of the perverted emphasis which has dominated Miltonic interpretation to our own day. Their efforts were directed primarily to an examination of Milton's poetic art in the light of the principles of poetry set forth by Aristotle and reinterpreted by the theorists of the neo-classic school. The process had already begun during the Restoration period when Dryden, taking a narrow

view, finds in the "unprosperous event," the disproportion between the divine and human personages, and other technical shortcomings, a violation of epic principles. But the condemnation of Milton on these grounds could not satisfy the better sense of the critics themselves. Possessed of a more genuine responsiveness to sincere and lofty poetry than we sometimes give them credit for, they recognized the genius of Milton as they did of Shakespeare and desired to justify him on some valid and accepted critical basis. It was in this spirit that Addison in the next generation wrote the famous critique in the *Spectator*, vindicating Milton's epic art by a sympathetic analysis of *Paradise Lost* according to the method of Aristotle, with comparison of Homer and Virgil. Other critics fell back on the standard conclusion that Milton, like Shakespeare, was a great irregular genius, rising superior to rule. Dennis founded the poet's claims on the higher inspiration due to his Christian theme, and finally Warburton defined *Paradise Lost* as a new species of epic poem, deserving a place independent of but equal to the epic forms invented by Homer and Virgil.⁸

It is unnecessary in this place to pronounce on the respective merits of these viewpoints. We have only to note that the discussion centered in questions of literary art. With the great controversy over Milton's blank verse which raged throughout the period it is the same. For the eighteenth century critic the major point at issue regarding Milton was the basis of æsthetic theory on which his fame must rest.

Now we must recognize that the attitude assumed in these discussions was perfectly valid as far as it went, and later critics along this line have had little to do but to choose and amplify one or the other methods of approach as their critical creed or temperament

⁸ "Milton produced a third species of poetry; for just as Virgil rivalled Homer, so Milton emulated both. He found Homer possessed of the province of Morality, Virgil of Politics, and nothing was left for him but that of Religion. This he seized as aspiring to share with them in the Government of the Poetic world; and by means of the superior dignity of his subject, got to the head of that Triumvirate which took so many ages in forming. These are the species of the Epic poem; for its largest province is human action, which can be considered but in a moral, a political or a religious view; and these the three great creators of them; for each of these poems was struck out at a heat, and came to perfection from its first Essay. Here then the grand scene is closed, and all further improvement of the Epic is at an end." Quoted by Good, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

inclines them to the classical or romantic estimate of æsthetic values. Milton himself invited consideration of his works from this angle, in his frequent claims of artistic relationship with the ancients, in his defense of blank verse against the "modern bondage of rhyme," and in his obvious consciousness of the formulated theories of epic and dramatic poetry which the Renaissance inherited from antiquity. Progress, therefore, was real enough in the critical treatment of *Paradise Lost* in the eighteenth century, but if it constituted in the end a pretty complete vindication of Milton's art, it contributed little to a fuller comprehension of his substance, led to no real interpretation of his greatest work, and furnishes no evidence as to whether this work was actually read in the spirit and from the point of view from which it was written.

Meanwhile, however, other notes were struck in eighteenth century Milton appreciation which concern themselves rather with substance and spirit than with form. A consideration of these developments will bring us forcibly to the conclusion that the dominant spiritual outlook of the period resulted in the playing up in Milton's work of values which were not the essential values and rendered the age incapable of seeing *Paradise Lost* in its true light.

In so far as the currents of eighteenth century thought set toward rationalism Milton, with his faith in the supernatural governance of the world and his recognition of the authority of the divine imperative within the soul, could waken little real sympathy. To the philosophers of the scientific dispensation the moral and theological system which had held sway in Milton's mind and with which he would have believed the poem bound to stand or fall, was dead. No longer valuing him for his ideas they were obliged, if they regarded him at all, to fall back upon his art. But the immense popularity of Milton in the eighteenth century and the high esteem in which *Paradise Lost* was held, were not primarily based on an æsthetic appreciation. Writers like Addison did not create the fame of Milton; they found him already in the field, holding his place against all comers. Their service was, by exploring the grounds of admiration, at once to increase its volume and to determine its direction. The *Spectator* papers, with their popular adaptation of the critical technique of the day, tended to justify the public in their instinctive choice. But already in Addison's critique much space is devoted to other aspects of the

poet's work. In his running commentary on the separate books, as well as incidentally in the course of the formal analysis to which the earlier papers in the series are devoted, Addison emphasizes deeper values in the poem, the recognition of which came ultimately to make Milton seem like the prophet of a new era.

The turn of the century had seen an important change in the position of Milton in relation to the dominant thought and feeling of the age. During the Restoration the reaction against Puritan "enthusiasm," the cynical scorn of virtue, the repression of emotion in all its forms had resulted in a general lack of sympathy with the substance of Milton's poetry, while the unpopularity of the poet's politics served also to throw his merits into collapse. The political revolution of 1688 and the revolution in moral sentiment which attended it called his work again into esteem. Religion and virtue being no longer unfashionable, a religious poem commending virtue might be read with approval by a gentleman. The poetical tributes, with their emphasis on the poet's pure morality and on the divinely inspired character of his imagination fall in with the traditional admiration of the "sublimity" of his subject and the majesty of his style. There is, too, an increasing tendency to stress the emotional and human elements in *Paradise Lost*, in so far as these fall within the perceptions of its readers of those days. In a social age, as Good points out, the social features of the epic came in for particular attention, the more so because Milton had portrayed society in its elements and in an idealized form. It would appear from Steele that *Paradise Lost* in this aspect had already been introduced on terms of familiarity into the drawing-room life of the time. He represents a party of women remarking that Milton had said "some of the tenderest things ever heard" in the love speeches of Adam and Eve, and on another occasion he speaks of a fan on which was painted "our first parents asleep in each others arms." Steele himself never tires of quoting passages and commending "beauties" of *Paradise Lost*, selecting almost invariably scenes and speeches from the domestic life of the first lovers. And Addison, with a somewhat wider range, does the same. Much is said in the Critique of the "justice" and "beauty" of Milton's "sentiments." He is claimed to have "filled a great part of his Poem with that kind of writing which the French critics call the Tender and which is in a particular manner engaging to

all sorts of readers." In his discussion of the character and relations of Adam and Eve Addison writes almost entirely from this standpoint. The representation is said to be "wonderfully contrived to influence the Reader with Pity and Compassion." The characters are drawn "with such sentiments as do not only interest the Reader in their afflictions, but raise in him the most melting passions of Humanity and Commiseration." Detailed illustrations follow, particular emphasis being placed on the reconciliation of the sinning pair.

These passages should be read in the light of those other *Spectator* essays which comment on the domestic virtues, sentimentalize over conjugal affection, and look with indulgent commiseration on the weaknesses of man and woman which so often make their common pathway through the world a vale of tears.

We recognize at once that the emotional expansion of the era had opened new gateways of Miltonic appreciation, and we do not wonder at the degree to which he became an ally of the forward movements of the age. If, however, we consider for a moment the philosophical postulates which were behind the sentimental attitude we shall see why it was impossible for anyone deeply touched by the new creed to grasp the central reality of Milton's view of life. The cardinal fact is that the doctrine of original sin, with all its implications, had given way to the theory of the natural goodness of the human heart. The evil of the world is evil of circumstances only, and as such it is apparent rather than real, an inevitable part of the perfect system of the universe formed by divine intelligence. The logical consequence of such a view is the weakening of conviction regarding human responsibility, and with it the disappearance of all ideas of the tragedy of character. We see the operation of this principle in the eighteenth century drama of pity, in which the greatest crimes are condoned and attention distracted from the momentous consequences of moral choice to the misfortunes of those persons who because of wrong education or the overwhelming pressure of temptation pursue the wretched path which leadeth to the gallows. The effect of this attitude is apparent everywhere in eighteenth century comment on *Paradise Lost*. We feel it, for example, in Addison when he speaks of "the miserable aspects of eternal infelicity," and it gives ludicrous results in Bentley's cheerful alteration of the last two lines of Milton's epic from

They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

to

Then hand in hand with social steps their way
Through Eden took, with Heavenly comfort cheered.

We may note also a final fruit of the softening of Milton's grim realities in Burns's humorous commiseration of Satan in the *Address to the Deil*:

But, fare you weel, Auld Nickie-ben!
O, wad ye take a thought an' men!
Ye aiblins might—I dinna ken—
Still hae a stake:
I'm wae to think upo' yon den,
Ev'n for your sake!

Obviously it would be impossible for the eighteenth century man of feeling to enter into the heroic consciousness of John Milton; for him the Puritan poet's central theme of the operation of divine justice through which Paradise was lost to man as the consequence of his own sin and restored to him again by the exercise of the righteous will, could mean nothing. We find in the characteristic eighteenth century rhapsodies on Milton a steadfast avoidance of this issue. A perusal of the long list of poetic tributes quoted by Good will show that Milton lovers throughout the period praise everything about the poet but the strength and fidelity of his handling of the fundamental problem which he set out to treat.

An intensification and a deepening of eighteenth century feeling for Milton was brought about by the rise of emotional religion. Men like Wesley found an important source of inspiration in *Paradise Lost*, while to Cowper Milton, congenial both in his art and in his religious thought, became an ever present companion in the daily meditations of the heart. The religious use of Milton, which caused *Paradise Lost* as a devotional work to retain even to the present day a place coördinate with *Pilgrim's Progress* and second only to the Bible, hardly produces a critical interpretation, but it does involve a shift of attention to the spiritual and meditative aspects of the poem. Thus the loves of Adam and Eve received less attention than their pure devotions in Eden and their ultimate reconciliation to the will of God. A closer sympathy with Milton's deeper interests results, but it must be admitted that in so far as the new religion partakes of the unchecked emotionalism of the

sentimental movement it is foreign to Milton's balanced and temperate philosophy of life. The stern yet hopeful outlook of the poet's creed had given way to a morbid melancholy. The idea of man's struggle toward moral freedom, the sober consciousness of difficulties and dangers which might yet be overcome by the exercise of the firm and enlightened will was lost in the subjectivism of the Methodist revival, with its insistence on sudden conversion (an idea quite alien to Milton's thought) and its tendency to emphasize salvation by grace rather than by character.

The true measure of the eighteenth century reading of *Paradise Lost* is clearly given by a consideration of the various forms of the Miltonic influence in the literature of the period. Natural admiration for the poet's genius, the spell exercised by his exalted utterance, the fact that with all his irregularities he yet afforded the one great English model of epic poetry on classical lines, combined to make him a major force in eighteenth century poetry. In one aspect the Miltonism of the age is to be interpreted as a phase of classicism. The doctrine of imitation was extended to include the use of older English authors and Milton became a favorite model of style and form. As a pattern of the epic *Paradise Lost* completely dominated the eighteenth century. Thus the *Rape of the Lock*, despite its professed adherence to ancient models, owes perhaps more to Milton than it does to Homer or Virgil. With the serious epics of Blackmore it is the same. In style Milton is the father of eighteenth century blank verse, and here the influence joins with the currents which set toward the romantic movement. The deeper effects of the study of Milton are to be seen in Thomson and Cowper, who found in him the serious feeling, the reverent attitude, the sincerity and warmth of poetic utterance which they missed in the writings of the school of Pope. It is impossible to discuss this subject at any length. The point is that the influence of Milton was felt first of all in matters of style and form by poets who were utterly removed from him in spirit; and that even where it counted for the deepening of poetic sensibility it produced no re-embodiment of his philosophy of life, no attempt to carry further his imaginative presentation of the problem of evil, no echo, in short, of the humanistic attitude which he inherited from the Renaissance both on its intellectual and moral side. Alienated in interest and aim from the whole period the poet finds neither in its

intellectual elite nor in its deeper emotional and religious natures more than a partial comprehension.

From the eighteenth century view of Milton to the nineteenth the transition is direct but strongly marked. The close of the century saw, on the one hand, an increased emphasis on the spiritual values in *Paradise Lost*, and, on the other, a tendency to make the poet a champion of radicalism in politics, religion, and art. Details of the romantic application need not be given here.⁴ We may, however, note its most significant phases, and again raise the question whether it affords a view sufficiently in accord with Milton's purposes to be acceptable as a basis for critical interpretation.

The beginnings of a more liberally conceived justification of Milton's art we have already noted. The new romantic criticism revolted sharply against neo-classic standards and prided itself upon having rescued Milton, with Shakespeare, from the Procrustean bed of eighteenth century formalism. Setting a supreme value on the imagination as opposed to form or thought the romantic writers saw in Milton the English poet who above all others

rode sublime
Upon the seraph wings of ecstasy,

and they made, more emphatically than the eighteenth century appreciators had made, Milton's imaginative sublimity the true criterion of his greatness. They expatiate on the grandeur of his characters, his images, his verse, illuminating the Miltonic quality with a rich abundance of qualifying phrase. A typical essay is that of Hazlitt, whose treatment of Satan, for instance, considered as a piece of purely descriptive appreciation, can hardly be surpassed:

The poet has not in all this given us a mere shadowy outline; the strength is equal to the magnitude of the conception. The Achilles of Homer is not more distinct; The Titans were not more vast; Prometheus chained to his rock was not a more terrific example of suffering and of crime. Wherever the figure of Satan is introduced, whether he walks or flies, "rising aloft incumbent on the dusky air," it is illustrated with the most striking and appropriate images: so that we see it always before us, gigantic, irregular, portentous, uneasy and disturbed—but dazzling in its faded splendor, the clouded ruins of a god.

⁴ A discussion of the romantic use of Milton in the eighteenth century is to be found in Good, *op. cit.*, 208 ff.

Such a passage suggests the changed relationship of the new age to the poetry of Milton, on the æsthetic side. But the true secret of the Miltonic "revival" of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries lies not solely, not primarily, in a revised estimate of his poetic quality, but in a new interpretation of the moral and spiritual content of his work—a new reading of his "message" to the generations of mankind. It is here that the Romanticists give us a new Milton constituted in their own image and worshipped as they believed, at last in spirit and in truth. This new Milton is first of all a seer, a mystic. His imagination is not so much a quality of literary excellence as it is an instrument wherewith the spirit of man is enabled to pass "the flaming bounds of time and space" and be at one with supersensuous and divine reality. Such he was to Blake, who, notwithstanding his abhorrence of Milton's fundamental creed, had impregnated himself with *Paradise Lost* as he had with Scripture and had fed his own distorted imagination with the poet's creations, unconscious of the impassable gulf which yawned between himself and one whose most rapt imagination never led him for a moment to trespass beyond the bounds of sanity. But more characteristically, perhaps, the romantic Milton is an individual. Admiration for his art is lost in admiration for his personality. His poetry becomes a sublime embodiment of will and passion, an expression of the grandeur of soul which elevated him above the pettiness of his human environment and made him stand firm against the shock of circumstances. For Shelley and Byron he is the type of the free personality, a hero in the warfare against the tyranny of law. It is thus that Shelley apostrophizes him in *Adonais*:

He died,—

Who was the sire of an immortal strain,
Blind, old, and lonely, when his country's pride,
The priest, the slave, and the liberticide,
Trampled and mocked with many a loathed rite
Of lust and blood; he went, unterrified,
Into the gulf of death; but his clear Sprite
Yet reigns o'er earth; the third among the sons of light.

And Byron in the Dedication to *Don Juan*:

If, fallen in evil days on evil tongues,
Milton appealed to the Avenger, Time,
If Time, the Avenger, execrates his wrongs,

And makes the word "Miltonic" mean "sublime,"
 He deign'd not to belie his soul in songs,
 Nor turn his very talent to a crime;
 He did not loathe the Sire to laud the Son
 But closed the tyrant-hater he begun.

The "sublimity" of Milton thus becomes a personal quality—sublimity of soul. His works are interpreted in the light of his career, and are read as the record of his life-struggle. This attitude marks an important advance over the sentimental or the purely literary approach of the eighteenth century; its limitation is to be sought in the essential contradiction between the Miltonic and the romantic ideal of character. For Byron, and, to a large extent, Shelley, make Milton what he assuredly was not, an individualist like themselves, averting their eyes from the fact that the controlling principle of his life was after all not rebellion but free obedience. The official morality of *Paradise Lost* is discounted; Milton's insistent condemnation of Satan as the inversion of all good is ignored. The poet becomes a witness in spite of himself to the absolute value of "the will not to be changed by time or place" and a chief assailant of the moral and theological system of which he had innocently supposed himself to be a chief defender. Thus *Paradise Lost* is made the text of works and the source of sentiments the purport of which its author would not even have comprehended. From such discipleship as that of the creator of Cain and Manfred the great Puritan would surely have prayed to be delivered. The "fit audience though few" would not have included Byron, and the fame arising from his praise would have sounded something worse distorted than the vain plaudits of the "herd confused" who extol things vulgar and admire they know not what. The poet has himself pronounced the fitting condemnation:

Licence they mean when they cry liberty;
 For who loves that, must first be wise and good.

With Shelley the case stands somewhat differently. Inspired to resistance, not by mere passion and expansive egoism, but by a clearly discerned ideal of good, he saw Milton engaged, like himself, in a heroic conflict with the principle of evil in its earthly manifestations of tyranny and injustice. But for Shelley the principle of evil is incarnated in tradition and comes dangerously near to being

identical with law itself. Hence in *Prometheus Unbound*, which more than any other of his works was written under the inspiration of *Paradise Lost*, the typical utterance of the enchained Titan has a Satanic ring. His protest is against government itself, and not solely against government which is tyrannical and corrupt; and, what is more serious, he is an uncompromising enemy of historical Christianity, particularly on its Hebraic side. With such an attitude Milton could have had nothing in common. Had Shelley been less inclined to look in the works of poets he admired as in a mirror, finding there solely an image of himself, he might have remembered that his hero's ideal of government was embodied in the regime of Oliver Cromwell and that his personal religion and morality were squarely founded on the Hebrew Scriptures. Evidence of Shelley's complete inversion of the Miltonic viewpoint is to be found in the following judgment on the morality of *Paradise Lost*: "Milton's Devil, as a moral being, is as far superior to his God as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph, inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy, not from any mistaken notion of inducing him to repent of a perseverance in enmity, but with the alleged design of exasperating him to deserve new torments." In other words Satan and God stand in exactly the relation of Prometheus and Jupiter, and it is in Satan that Shelley finds the true embodiment of Milton's personality and of his moral ideal.

Wordsworth takes a saner view of Milton's personality. He has little to say of his rebellion, much of his stern righteousness and uncompromising idealism. To him the "sublimity" of Milton is a sublimity of character and spiritual insight, not one of passion and will. He invokes the poet's influence against the selfishness and base materialism of the times, crying, as every age has done and will do:

Milton, thou should'st be living at this hour.

In the noble ode in which he formally renounces the authority of impulse in favor of that of the moral law he catches the very phrase with which he addresses his new divinity from Milton's lips:

Stern daughter of the voice of God,
O Duty, if that name thou love.

All this brings Wordsworth very close to the spirit of Milton; it should be noted, however, that his appreciation of Milton is chiefly biographical, and gives no interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, though it points the way to one. Wordsworth shares in the tendency of his age to read Milton's works subjectively, as a personal record, ignoring the objective values which the formal eighteenth century criticism, whatever its limitations, is to be commended for having sought. Characteristically he derives his chief inspiration, not from the epics or dramas, but from the sonnets, the most personal of Milton's works.

As regards interpretation it was the emphasis given by men like Shelley and Byron rather than that of Wordsworth that was destined to survive. Though, to be sure, the excesses of Satan worship did not outlive the Byronic philosophy of life of which they were an essential part, it is not too much to say that later nineteenth century criticism has been largely dominated by the romantic point of view. For most critics Satan has remained the real, if not the technical hero of *Paradise Lost*. The earlier books of the poem have been admired at the expense of the whole, as by Macaulay, who remarked that Milton's reputation would have stood higher if he had written only the first four. The personality of the poet has been sought everywhere in his works and even his most objective utterances have been treated as expressions of his private point of view. That these values exist in *Paradise Lost* no one will for a moment deny. Considered as a whole the romantic appreciation of Milton is more vital, surely, than the Augustan and has justly enough discountenanced it. It has led, however, to the neglect of values not less vital, has distracted attention from important aspects of the poet's genius, and, above all, has stood in the way of a full acceptance of *Paradise Lost* as an embodiment of human truth, a poetic application, in Arnold's phrase, of moral ideas to life.

The fundamental difficulty in the nineteenth century approach to Milton is, after all, identical with that of the eighteenth. It lies in the fact that in either age his way of thought—not his theology only, but his general attitude and outlook—was felt to be obsolete. In the eighteenth century it encountered the general scepticism and materialism of the intellectual classes or the enervated amiability of sentimentalism; in the nineteenth it was sup-

planted by a new idealism, which, having just escaped the shackles of orthodoxy, reacted against the irrationality of Milton's hard and coherent system of theology and, even more violently, against the materialistic terms to which he reduces supersensuous reality. He is unfavorably contrasted in this respect with Dante, whose Heaven of light, and love, and pure spirit is set against Milton's battlemented and bejewelled city of God, which, despite its splendors, is, as Milton has taken pains to make it, analogous at all points to earth. The same indictment is drawn against the naive materialism of Milton's entire narrative, which is held to do violence even to his own best thought. When, for example, Satan affirms that "the mind is its own place" and when Gabriel holds up to Adam's contemplation "a paradise within thee happier far" Milton has seemed to be transcending the limitations of Puritanism and to be speaking the language of modern idealism, but these utterances are felt to be in contradiction with the basic assumptions of the poem. The idea of a Heaven and Hell of spirit has seemed to accord but ill with the tragedy of the fall, with the facts of Satan's revolt, and with the constitution of a material Hell. To insist on such doctrines would be "to shatter the fabric of the poem." They must not, therefore, be insisted on. From the standpoint of idealism the substance of *Paradise Lost* must be condemned and the whole poem be regarded as an absurd but glorious fiction, based on an obsolete tradition which Milton naively accepted and which he exalted by virtue of his poetic power.

This, essentially, is the view taken by Sir Walter Raleigh, whose work on Milton must rank as the most brilliant treatment of the poet's art in the history of nineteenth century criticism. The study is, indeed, too broad and rich to be confined within a formula, but despite the freshness and sympathy of its treatment and the fullness with which it voices the accumulated wisdom regarding Milton of preceding generations of critics, it is yet limited in scope by preconceptions which its author holds in common with writers like DeQuincy, Masson and Pattison, not to mention others of a still earlier school. In his discussion of the scheme of *Paradise Lost* Raleigh is chiefly concerned with noting the insuperable difficulties imposed not merely upon our belief but on our imagination by the necessity Milton was under of giving "physical, geometric embodiment to a far-reaching scheme of abstract speculation and

thought—parts of it very reluctant to such treatment.” This undoubtedly is sound, but it assumes that the abstract speculation, namely the theology, and not the human reality which coexists with it and takes its significance partly but only partly from it, constitutes the true substance and content of the poem. For Raleigh *Paradise Lost* is neither more nor less than “an imposing monument to dead ideas.” When he comes to deal with the characters of the poem Raleigh’s failure to rate the moral insight of Milton at its true value leads him to judgments to which it is impossible for the present writer to subscribe. By exalting the grandeur of Satan Milton is said to have “stultified the professed moral of the poem and emptied it of all spiritual content, led by a profound poetic instinct to preserve epic truth at all costs.” In his treatment of Adam and Eve he is felt to be dealing essentially with unrealities. Raleigh, though he does not go to such lengths of ridicule as Taine, sees Adam as little better than a stupid and wooden projection of the more forbidding elements of Milton’s Puritan personality. To Eve he allows a certain degree of humanity, but he makes her chiefly the vehicle of a Miltonic diatribe against woman. The concluding judgment is stated quite flatly. “While Milton deals with abstract thought or moral truth his handling is tight, pedantic, and disagreeably hard. But when he comes to describe his epic personages, and his embodied visions, all is power, and vagueness, and grandeur. His imagination, escaped from the narrow prison of his thought, rises like a vapor, and, taking shape before his eyes, proclaims itself his master.”

Now all that Raleigh or any critic claims for the grandeur of Milton’s imagination is undeniably true, but it is to be doubted if the poet himself would have valued an immortality of fame accorded to him only on such terms. The theme of his epic was to him no poetic fiction, and a judgment of his work based on this assumption would have outraged his deepest convictions. For him at least the fall was true, and the conviction of its truth is a condition of the entire sincerity of his treatment. The subject was dignified in his mind, not by its grandeur, but by its superior validity as an explanation of human experience. For it he had discarded the Arthurian material; into it he had thrown his heart. That readers for whom it was no longer in some sense true could by any means enter into a full understanding of his work he would never have believed.

For most modern readers the nineteenth century estimate, as embodied in Raleigh's *Milton*, is the final estimate. The poem is read, if read at all, for its art, its eloquence, its elevation. The events which it recounts and Milton's interpretation of those events are felt to belong to an order of belief which can possess, at best, but a curious historic interest. The poem remains, in Raleigh's phrase, "a monument to dead ideas." It is, of course, of little avail to attempt to restore *Paradise Lost* to its original authority by asking such readers to suspend their disbelief and adopt the convictions which underlie it simply because, without them, it is impossible to regard the work with Milton's eyes. If Milton's thought is really dead it is impossible to galvanize it into life. But it is to mistake the real drift of the newer Miltonic study to assume that it proposes any such factitious rehabilitation of *Paradise Lost*. It proposes rather, as I read it, a reinterpretation and a revaluation of the poem in terms neither of sentimentalism nor of romanticism nor of Victorian idealism but of humanism, and it seeks as a first step toward such revaluation to see Milton's philosophy as a whole by exploring his prose as well as his poetry, to set him in his right relation, not to Puritanism alone, but to the entire Renaissance, and so to realize, through a richer understanding, the significance of his work as poetic criticism of life.

For such a reinterpretation of Milton the way is paved by the fact that the Calvinistic theology is no longer a subject of controversy. It has become possible at last to approach him dispassionately, with due sympathy for whatever we may recover of permanently true and valid from the religious thought of the age. Indeed the virtues of the orthodox way of thinking are quite as apparent to us now as its defects. Thus Chesterton maintains intelligibly enough the validity of the doctrine of original sin. Certainly our reaction against the facile optimism of Victorian religious liberalism, which banished Satan to the limbo of illusion and discovered the joyous fact that all roads lead to Heaven though it were through Hell, has tended to restore to us in a marked degree the moral atmosphere in which Milton lived. Finally the tendency to find sanity and truth in the ideas of the Renaissance has infused new zeal into an Elizabethan scholarship not always so divorced from its human objectives as the critics of our Germanized research would have us believe, with the result that there has been con-

structed a sounder basis for Miltonic criticism than that afforded by the biographical history of Masson.

The outstanding effect of the study of Milton's philosophy as embodied in his poetry and prose, and of the endeavor to relate him more closely to his English predecessors has been to minimize the importance of his theology in the narrower sense, and to exalt in its place, not merely his art and eloquence and imagination, but those elements of insight and reflection which he holds in common with Spenser, Hooker, Shakespeare, and Bacon—men in whose work the northern and southern currents of the age are fused in that richer and profounder creative humanism which is the special contribution of the English Renaissance. The essential character of that humanism is its assertion of the spiritual dignity of man, its recognition of the degree to which his higher destinies are in his own hands, its repudiation of the claim of his lower nature to control his higher or of any force or agency external to his own mind and will to achieve for him salvation. This humanism is sharply and irreconcilably at odds with mediæval thought. It discards, first of all, the ascetic principle and releases for enjoyment and use all the agencies of self-realizing perfection. It proposes, moreover (and this is its essential character) to achieve its goal through the study not of God but of man and it trusts the human reason as well as intuition and revealed truth as the instrument of its knowledge. It turns, therefore, to Scripture for the best record of man's nature in its relation to the God of righteousness and love, then to the *litterae humaniores* of antiquity, where it finds a wider revelation of man as an individual and a citizen, this latter source constituting no denial but a completion of the data afforded by the former.

Now Milton, throughout his life, was a humanist in both his method and his aim. Though inheriting certain mediæval tendencies in thought and art, the bent of his mind, as Professor Ramsay has shown, carried him further and further away from them. He retains to be sure certain fundamental postulates and assurances in common with mediæval Christianity. He is convinced of God, of the fact of evil, of the inevitableness of retribution, and of the hope of Heaven. These postulates are the postulates not of Puritanism alone but of the total humanism of the Renaissance. They are absolutely vital to Milton's thought. The

intellectual scaffolding with which they are supported and which, because of the subject demanded it is given in *Paradise Lost*, though not in *Paradise Regained* or *Samson*, is not thus vital. The real "system" which Milton erects is not a theology but an interpretation of experience, based on the bed rock of human freedom, and formulated under the guiding influence of the Bible, the ancients, and the thinkers and poets of the preceding generation.

To embody such ideas as were really living in Milton's consciousness in imaginative form was in no sense a work of violence. His imagination, instead of "proclaiming itself his master," in the way in which it proclaimed itself, for example, Blake's master, because he surrendered himself wholly to it, is for Milton the powerful instrument wherewith, following methods analogous, in some ways to those of Spenser, in others to those of Shakespeare, he gives to his philosophy of life a local habitation and a name. Nor is he greatly hampered by the literalness of his acceptance of the data afforded by the Biblical tradition. For if the events connected with the fall of man were to him literal facts they were also symbols, and it is upon the rock of their symbolic or universal rather than of their literal and particular truth that his faith was based. In his treatise on Christian Doctrine Milton boldly avows the principle of Biblical interpretation which controls his treatment of the subject matter of *Paradise Lost*. The expressions of Scripture are indeed to be accepted in their literal sense, but they are to be interpreted by the individual judgment and in accord with the superior revelation of the Inner Light, which in the language of the poet's art means nothing less than the inspired imagination. In *Paradise Lost* Milton affirms that the account of the battle in Heaven is merely a way of representing spiritual truth to the human understanding. Obviously his belief is anything but naive. And as to the actual experience of Adam and Eve, not to mention the desperate plot of evil men in Hell to overthrow the reign of righteousness and law, they are richer in human truth than anything in English imaginative literature outside of Shakespeare, and Milton has been able to give them wide and permanent significance by virtue of a lifetime spent in the study of man's nature in its relation to the moral and spiritual forces by which his destiny is shaped.

In this view, therefore, Milton is no mere poetic voice speaking

irrationalities, nor yet simply a transcendent imagination, but a poet of humanity, and *Paradise Lost* is primarily the epic of man's moral struggle, the record of his first defeat and the promise of his ultimate victory. Its necessary counterpart is *Paradise Regained*, in which that promise is fulfilled by the spiritual triumph of the human Christ.

Such is the emphasis toward which the Miltonic scholarship of the present day inevitably leads us. This scholarship is, in general, an outcome of the return to humanism, and contemporary humanists, whatever their special creed, should rejoice in the result. For Milton freed from the perversities of pseudo-classicism, sentimentalism, and romanticism, viewed without controversial rancor, and brought into line with his great predecessors of the Renaissance, is surely an ally. The true Milton is subject to no one of the counts in the fierce indictment which Mr. Babbitt, and Mr. More, and Mr. Sherman are directing against the literature of our own day and of our romantic past. Deeply sympathetic with the aspirations of men toward freedom of life he yet esteems freedom only as the essential condition for the functioning and self-development of the "inner check." Outward freedom and inward control or freedom with discipline is the authentic humanistic formula which Milton applies in all the domains of education, politics, morality, religion, and art. Champion of liberty though he is he yet knows that

orders and degrees
Jar not with liberty but well consent.

The Platonic subordination of the lower faculties of man to the higher is the central doctrine of his philosophy of life. Yet he avoids the danger of asceticism inherent in Plato's thought, condemning the Utopian politics of the *Republic* and repeatedly vindicating the free use of all the instrumentalities of man's self-realization. In the intellectual sphere, filled as he is with the zeal of knowledge and willing to toil unendingly in the search for the scattered members, even to the smallest, of the sacred body of truth, he yet affirms that

Knowledge is as food and needs no less
Her temperance over appetite,

and he permits the angel to warn Adam to

Think only what concerns thee and thy being,

a sentence which, well pondered, might serve as a text for the whole humanistic indictment of the scientific preoccupations of today. In religion he does not rest with "vague intuitions of the infinite," though he is not without them, but soberly worships the God of righteousness whose dwelling is the heart of man. Finally, in art he knows what he wants and knows how to attain it. Creative and original, untrammelled in his effort to realize to the full his imaginative conception and untouched or nearly so by the formalism of the neo-classic creed, he is yet obediently loyal to the laws of a disciplined taste and he is wisely regardful of the ancients, those "models as yet unequalled of any" in excellence of literary form.

These profound convictions put Milton clearly on the side of contemporary humanism, a humanism which, however "new," is not without its essential community with the old. Such in future appreciation he will more and more be felt to be. We have insisted too long on the supposed austerity of his temper and on the narrowness of his Puritan thought; we have misinterpreted the character of the change in viewpoint of his later years and have failed to perceive that instead of passing farther from the Renaissance he had moved nearer to its central truths. Finally, adopting Arnold's hard and fast distinction of Hebraism and Hellenism, we have assumed too readily that the Reformation and the Renaissance are in Milton contradictory and irreconcilable motives, omitting to credit him with a conscious and consistent endeavor to harmonize them, which at least challenges attention. This, indeed, is Milton's peculiar contribution to the cause and philosophy of humanism, and there is a special significance in the fact that his is the final word of the whole era. Not earlier perhaps, was even an attempt at such a conscious synthesis possible, and without the aid of poetry it could hardly even so have been accomplished. Due allowance being made for an antiquated manner of expression, Milton has given as goodly and comprehensive a formula for the aim and method of education as is to be found in the literature of the Renaissance or as any humanist could wish:

The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith, makes up the highest perfection. But because our understanding cannot in this body find itself but on sensible things, nor arrive so clearly to the knowledge

of God and things invisible, as by conning over the visible and inferior creature, the same method is necessarily to be followed in all discreet teaching. And seeing every nation affords not experience and tradition enough for all kinds of learning, therefore we are chiefly taught the languages of those people who have at any time been most industrious after wisdom. . . . I call therefore a complete and generous education, that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war.

Complementary to this is his description of the poet's function :

These abilities, wheresoever they may be found, are the gift of God, rarely bestowed, but yet to some (though most abuse) in every nation; and are of power, beside the office of a pulpit, to inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of virtue and public civility, to allay the perturbations of the mind, and set the affections in right tune; to celebrate in glorious and lofty hymns the throne and equipage of God's almightiness, and what he works, and what he suffers to be wrought with his providence in his church; to sing the victorious agonies of martyrs and saints, the deeds and triumphs of just and pious nations, doing valiantly through faith against the enemies of Christ; to deplore the general relapse of kingdoms and states from justice and God's true worship. Lastly, whatsoever in religion is holy and sublime, in virtue amiable and grave, whatsoever hath passion or admiration in all the changes of that which is called fortune from without, or the wily subtleties and refluxes of man's thoughts from within; all these to paint out and describe with a solid and treatable smoothness.

There is little need to quarrel with the didactic bias of Milton's theory. It imposes no necessary limitation on the scope of his art, but merely commits him to a high seriousness of purpose which is in accord with the best traditions of the age. Its practical results are *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*, works in which the total Renaissance is summed up and revealed as one, through a harmony of its great ideals of beauty, righteousness, and truth. Such a harmony, though made, no doubt, in the special language of the times, is valid for all times. We shall yet learn, it may be, to regard Milton as a more authentic spokesman than we had believed of three great centuries by no means silent, and we shall know him as a powerful voice of guidance amid the chaos of the present day.

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